



# What you should know about Smallpox Vaccine

## ABOUT THE VACCINE

### **Why is the government recommending smallpox vaccinations for some people?**

Following the terrorist attacks of 2001, many efforts have been made to ensure that the United States is as prepared as possible for any future episodes of terrorism, including bioterrorism. Although the risk of a smallpox attack is minimal, the federal government has determined that these vaccinations will be invaluable in protecting those most likely to be exposed should such an attack happen.

Recent federal smallpox vaccination recommendations for some health care, public health, military and other emergency staff are part of ongoing national emergency preparedness efforts. Smallpox vaccinations are not recommended for the general public.

### **Haven't I already been vaccinated against smallpox?**

In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox stopped in 1972, and was discontinued for military personnel in 1990. Currently, only people who work with similar viruses in laboratories routinely receive smallpox vaccine. The immunity gained from smallpox vaccination is believed to last about 10 years. People who have been vaccinated multiple times may have some protection against infection but, in general, most people in the United States are not immune to smallpox.

### **Does the vaccine contain smallpox?**

The vaccine does not contain the smallpox virus. It contains a related live virus called *Vaccinia*.

### **If I receive a smallpox vaccination will I be contagious?**

Yes, you will be contagious with the virus used in the vaccine (not smallpox) and it may be necessary to limit your contact with people who may be most at risk of developing serious side effects from the vaccine. These include: people with eczema or certain skin conditions, people with compromised immune systems, and pregnant women. You will be contagious until all sores have healed and the scabs have fallen off.

### **What are the risks associated with getting a smallpox vaccination?**

Although the vaccine does not contain the smallpox virus, it does contain another virus that can be dangerous. Unless there has been an exposure to smallpox, the vaccine should not be given to pregnant women, children under one year of age, people who are allergic to any of the vaccine components, people with eczema or other serious skin conditions, or those with weakened or compromised immune systems.

In March 2003, following reports of heart attacks after vaccination, the CDC began investigating whether the vaccine may be a risk for people with a history of heart disease. Until more information is available, people with certain types of heart disease should not be vaccinated.

Side effects from the vaccine may range from pain or fever to encephalitis, serious skin disorders or, in rare cases, death.

### **What is the chance of having an adverse reaction to the vaccine?**

In the past, 250 out of every million people who were vaccinated for the first time experienced adverse reactions to the vaccine. That rate could possibly be higher now because of the increased numbers of people with compromised immune systems.

Death occurs in one of every million first time smallpox vaccinations.

### **Can I purchase a vaccination or obtain one from my doctor?**

No. The smallpox vaccine is controlled by the federal government through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is not available to any health care practice for administration to the general public.

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